

Style

8. Subjects and Styles

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Some kinds of literary anomaly or incoherence are caused not by the use of disparate materials but by deliberate or unconscious alternations of style and method on the part of the composer.

Changes of style are often conditioned by changes of subject. The Iliad ~~is~~ may be thought to be unusually homogeneous in subject: it is a war poem, its main scene restricted to the Trojan plain. Yet even the descriptions of fighting are astonishingly diversified, ranging from mere catalogues of victims to elaborate set-pieces with taunts and counter-taunts.

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Normally style only comes into question when there is a choice of presentation, when content can be expressed in at least two different ways.

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The stylistic analysis of Homer is an occupation to be indulged in at one's peril. It was common in the latter half of the last century, but was done in so insensitive and careless a manner, and led to results so blatantly contradictory, that since then there has been a silent conspiracy to consider questions of style as beyond the scope of true ^{scholar} authorship. This approach seems to me feeble and unjustified. It is obvious enough that the estimation of literary style is an abstract and subjective activity. Yet certain stylistic differences are easily recognizable in the Iliad and Odyssey, and there could be little disagreement about, say, the decorated lyrical style of the Iliad. I have deliberately concentrated on some easily recognizable differences of stylistic effect, and have emphasized that many differences of style are likely to be due to changes of subject rather than of composer. . . . Often the same kind of death, as when a charioteer is hit by a spear and topples from his chariot, is described in two or three different parts of the poem with slight variations. Sometimes it seems possible to say of such closely similar but not identical passages that one must be prior in composition and has been subjected to more or less appropriate variation in its other uses. Unfortunately, though, there is no justification for concluding, in a traditional poem, that the context of an apparently original description was composed earlier than that of an apparent derivative: for the derivative might itself be quite odd, both ~~it~~ it and the original may have been floating around in the tradition for a generation or more, and the passage containing the derivative version, in a poem like the Iliad, may actually have been put together before the passage containing the original.

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In short there is something to be learned from the search for different styles in Homer. Obviously, different styles do not necessarily entail different authors; it would be fantastic to imagine that the main poet of the Iliad - or indeed any competent singer - was incapable of composing in something like the majestic style, if he so wished, as well as in the ~~more~~ succinct narrative style or the much commoner 'normal' style to which we can attach no special description. The question is whether or when he did so wish.